

Causes and Consequences of Perceived Financial Exploitation in Older Adults

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BACKGROUND

Financial Exploitation (FE)

FE is the most common form of elder mistreatment and a significant public health issue.

It occurs when someone misuses or takes the assets of a vulnerable older adult for their own personal benefit.

\$36 billion are lost annually to FE.



The Public Health Context

Older adults generally have fixed incomes and limited means and resources to recoup financial losses.

Loss of financial resources can take away from money that would normally be spent on health maintenance and promotion and day-to-day expenses.

The act of exploitation can also negatively impact emotional health and personal outlook.

FINCHES

The Finance, Cognition, and Health in Elders Study (FINCHES) is a cohort study of FE in cognitively intact older adults.

During the pilot phase of the study, we recruited participants (ages 50+) with and without a history of FE to participate in qualitative and quantitative assessments.

We present findings here from the qualitative investigation of 15 participants who self-reported having had a FE experience.

METHODS

Self-reported FE

Along with a quantitative assessment of physical, social, emotional, cognitive health, and financial decision-making, we asked participants if they had ever been taken advantage of financially. Participants who responded “yes” were invited to complete a qualitative interview.



Qualitative Interviews



We conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Questions elicited details about the incidents, the perceived causes, and consequences. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded using content analysis for emergent themes and summarized. Participants received \$10.

RESULTS

Demographics

The mean age of participants was 72.3 (SD=13.0); 68% identified as female; 67% identified as white, 20% as Asian, and 13% did not report race/ethnicity; all completed at least high school with 67% completing college or more.

Types of FE

22 distinct incidents were described falling into the following categories:

Investment fraud/pyramid scheme (36%)	Charities or lotteries (14%)
Services/contractors (23%)	Long-term exploitative relationships (9%)
Money lending (14%)	Identity theft (5%)

Amount of money lost ranged from \$500-\$300,000.

Perceived Consequences

Immediate emotional impacts	Anger; shame; self-defeated
Outlook	Lost trust in others; suspicious; vigilant; better to be rude than fall for a scam again
Behaviors	Won't take unsolicited calls or visits; more careful about loaning money, investments
No perceived impact	Money is not important; amount too small to have an impact

Nobody wants to be taken advantage of or feel like you did something that wasn't very smart...but it probably made me more suspicious of people. You know, I didn't kind of looked at things through rose-colored glasses as much. A little bit more suspicious of people. (Male)

The embarrassment is that we are not supposed to fall for this kind of stuff. We are supposed to be smart. After all, we have been around for years, you know. So, I think my lesson is that I need to be more careful. I need to pay more attention. It's probably better to air on the side of being rude and say no, then falling for something. (Female)

Perceived Causes

“Weathering”	Worn down by too many solicitations; occurred slowly over a number of years
Vulnerability	Older people are more vulnerable, trusting; emotionally vulnerable at the moment; feared for safety
Lack of vigilance	Didn't do research or seek advice of others
Impulsivity	Options seemed attractive; return on investment was tempting
Preserve relationships	Wants to help family; friend needed help; wanted to keep spouse happy

CONCLUSIONS

Greater understanding of the varying circumstances surrounding FE experiences can inform approaches to protect older adults.

This research was supported by a grant from the Elder Justice Foundation (PI: Han).